

In the town of Alnwick in Northumberland, where I was vicar for nine years, the medieval parish church of St Michael sits on the far northern edge of the town, not far from Alnwick Castle. Go into St Michael's through the south porch, turn to your left just inside and there on upright on the south wall is a medieval statue of a crowned king. It is about five feet high. His eyes are closed not open. And from his body protrude a number of deeply embedded arrows. This effigy is of course of Edmund, king of the East Angles and martyr, of whom I must say I had been only vaguely aware before this. But here was his statue in Alnwick, where he was clearly venerated in medieval times, and in Northumberland which has more than its fair share of local and celebrated saints associated with Lindisfarne and Durham. We see in this simple statue clear evidence that Edmund had soon after his life achieved a widespread and national significance, so much so that the local people of Alnwick commissioned this simple and rather moving statue of Edmund. Perhaps they prayed for his strength of purpose, set as they were in the dangerous and unstable borderlands between England and Scotland and all too familiar, as was Edmund, with the threat of the invading army and possible death. And that might well have been the link forged between Alnwick and Edmund.

Why did Edmund achieve such widespread veneration and so quickly after his death? There are 60 churches right across the country dedicated to Edmund's memory. Why would pilgrims from across these lands and across Europe take the trouble to travel to the abbey at St Edmundsbury to pray at his shrine?

In worldly terms Edmund's life and reign were a story of both success and failure. In 855 he was crowned king in obscure circumstances at the age of only 15. He was a devoted king in the service of his people and a brave commander of the army. The Danish invaders returned to these shores in 865 and four years later they defeated Edmund and his army at Thetford. They captured Edmund alive and offered him life if he renounced his Christian faith. He refused and he was martyred, shot through with arrows and then beheaded. Would that be the end of his story?

Well it was only thirty years later that King Alfred of Wessex, - a close contemporary of Edmund, and a king who achieved in both secular and spiritual leadership far more than Edmund - it was only thirty years after Edmund's death that Alfred was minting his own coins inscribed on the reverse with the words "Sanctus Edmund Rex" - "holy Edmund" or perhaps "saint Edmund, king". The veneration of Edmund must have begun very soon after his death. His earthly life was short. His life as a saint was just beginning.

What was it about Edmund? Think of the words of Jesus we heard in today's gospel reading: "Whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Those who find their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake will find it." We can be sure that in Edmund people

saw straightaway one who faithfully answered the call of Jesus, to a life of dedicated and costly service, thinking of the good of others before himself. They saw a royal life which ended in worldly terms in defeat, failure and death. So they could trace in Edmund's living and dying the life and death of Jesus, another sort of king who lived and died in the service of his people. And they saw Edmund who, like Jesus, died young about the age of 30, put to death by his enemies not unlike Jesus, on a tree. People could see Jesus Christ standing just behind Edmund who was nothing if not faithful to the call to take up his cross and follow.

The costly sacrifice of Edmund and the holiness of all his life and service have spoken tellingly over the 1200 years since his death and do so today. The pull, the attraction and attractiveness of Edmund and his story in his living and dying remain powerful. Just this week a party of schoolchildren was being taken round this cathedral by the Discovery Centre team. They had come here to learn about Edmund. And in the course of their visit they stood in front of Brian Whelan's picture of Edmund's death in the Lady Chapel. And one young girl stood in front of it and looked at the picture and said, "This would be a really good place for sad children to come to." And added, "And grown-ups too." Out of the mouths of babes.....

What this girl put into words so simply and eloquently was the continuing power and significance of this place as a shrine, as a sanctuary, as a holy place, the place where human frailty and divine power can encounter one another for good and healing and hope, as we journey on, we pilgrims young and old.

Some of us in the congregation are thinking about the gifts and qualities we would like to see in the next Dean. My hope is that she or he will see themselves clearly, not so much as an administrator or manager of the cathedral, important as that is, rather as the guardian or steward of this holy and mysterious place, this shrine, not just of Edmund but of Jesus Christ, where his life and love encounter us.

I wonder if you have been listening to any of the programmes by Neil MacGregor in his series "Living with the Gods" on Radio 4. He has been showing how, in many different ways, communities of faith across the ages and across the world create powerful networks of connection that bind us together across time and space and often across the different faiths as well. To transpose Neil MacGregor's words a little: "Those who come to a holy place do so in the company of millions who have done the same. In so doing we create a pattern of enduring connection between the human and the divine, and between each other, a pattern that shapes and sustains us and whole communities across the world and over the centuries."

In other words, we are deeply connected in one community, in our case with Edmund our patron, and with all the pilgrims here down the ages. As in the same way Edmund our patron was deeply connected with Jesus, taking Jesus at his word in death and in life - and still is alive among us.

On this patronal festival we pray to follow Edmund,
like him to keep faith to the end
and find, alone and together, life for ever
in Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen